Implementation of School Social Work Service (SSWS) at Municipality of Glyfada, Attica Greece Results of Pilot Case Study

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Abstract— **The project lasted three years and intervention techniques were: a) case assessment & referral b) counseling with students and their family & c) primary prevention programs. Evaluation of the pilot phase showed that sustainability of the project depends on sufficient community resources, multidisciplinary collaboration and continuous political support.**

Index Terms— **Local Authority, school social work, students, parents.**

I. INTRODUCTION

This paper aims to describe the implementation of a SSWS in municipality of Glyfada, Attica Greece. The project was designed and implemented by the multidisciplinary team of the Social Policy Office, in collaboration with school counselors and other community agencies. The rationale behind the project is that the social services' development at a local level is recognized as a good practice in Europe for the promotion of Quality of Life (QoL) of European citizens. Kallikratis Programme (3852/2010 Act), implements the development of social policy and social equity issues at a local level. One of the basic reforms of the Kallikratis Programme (The LocalSelf-Government Act 3852/2010,) is related with the improvement of QOL of citizens taking into account issues of social protection, solidarity, education and culture [1].

The purpose of school community service is to highlight the importance of the school environment for the psychosocial development of children and adolescents, as well as the contribution of local networking with community services.

II. THE ECOLOGICAL PERSPECTICE OF SCHOOL SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE.

The ecological perspective focuses on the reciprocal interactions of students with several environmental factors, which include various social systems, (e.g., family, peer group, neighborhood, and school). School community is considered a sub-system of the greater social system. Teachers, parents and students are the sub-systems of the school community and interrelate with each other [2].

Teachers often act as role models, especially for younger children's attitudes and behavior, and affect them indirectly and directly. Their role is more demanding since the changes in society on many levels makes important the need to establish a strong foundation for children enabling them to survive and complete as active rather than passive members in society [3], [4]. Furthermore, teachers can play the role of "adult supporter" or "significant other" [5]. Many times children and adolescents cannot directly express their need for help; that is why teachers may provide a safe environment which encourages them to express themselves. Finally, the subsystem parents or primary caregivers constitute the first institution of socialization. Their attitudes towards school and education depend on their own previous personal values and experiences, and determine their involvement in the educational process [6]. Finally, students should not be treated as passive receivers of knowledge but as active members of the school community.

The most important organizational concepts for school social workers to be knowledgeable about are culture and climate because they have impact on students' behavior and learning. A school's culture has been defined as the beliefs and expectations apparent in a school's daily routine, including how colleagues interact with one another, and the norms or beliefs shared by students, teachers, administrators, and other workers in the school. Mental health promotion in schools depends on the quality of interaction between the school community and broader community [7], [8].

Based on the above theoretical base, school social workers draw on a number of diverse roles and tasks to meet the unique needs of each school. Using the ecological framework as an organizing principle, these tasks include, maintaining open lines to communications between home and school, helping families understand their children's educational needs, consulting with teachers about students' living conditions, making referrals to community agencies, working with larger community to identify and develop resources to better serve the needs of at-risk students and their families [9].

In particular, school social workers are dually focused in their interventions. They must address specific environmental stressors, as well as enhance the coping skills of students. **Student focused interventions**, aim a) at promoting those protective factors which will help the child, the adolescent and the family to overcome a crisis, & b) at supporting school personnel in their role. **System focused interventions** via primary prevention programmes, target the whole school population, in order to promote mental health, enhance self-esteem, enhance students' coping and communication skills, and create a positive and supportive environment for all students. They are implemented in collaboration with other community agencies [3].

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III. DESCRIPTION OF THE PILOT PHASE OF THE SSWS.

A. Aims and Objectives of the project

Based on the ecological perspective, the school social work service started under the umbrella of the Kallikratis Programme in order to:

a) Address specific environmental stressors linked with the effects of the economic crisis on the lives of students and their families.

b) Enhance coping skills of students.

c) Improve and sustain collaboration between the school & other community agencies.

B. Stages of implementation of the pilot phase of the SSWS project in Municipality of Glyfada.

SSWS was implemented in three phases including, a) proposal submitting, networking with community resources and obtaining political consent, b) implementing interventions, and c) evaluation and communicating results (see table 1)

Table 1. *Stages of SSWS implementation.*

1st phase: Duration, 6 months (June 2011-to Dec.2011)
• *Obtain informal political consensus via proposal submission.*
• *Networking with the Local Parents Councils & key informants in the school community*
• *Networking with School Counselors & Principals (Gate Keepers)*
• *Spreading out the word via lectures and open discussions with parents and teachers.*
2nd Phase from Jan.2012-July 2012
• *We obtained the official consent from the Local Authority Council in order to "Implement the School Social Service". The project should have one school year pilot period and then after its evaluation, open for more school settings in the community. The first year of the project we started collaboration with three schools (2 primary schools, 1 high school).*
• **3rd Phase lasted from July2012-Sept. 2012**
Evaluation
Report   submission.

C. Axes of collaboration

School social work team collaborated with the **school counselor** who intervenes in order to facilitate collaboration between home-school-social worker, the **school principal,** who determines school culture and climate and the **teaching personnel** who often act as role models, especially for younger children's attitudes and behavior, and affect them indirectly and directly.

IV. ETHICAL ISSUES.

Recent empirical evidence indicated that school social workers inevitably confront a number of ethical dilemmas where professional ethics confront with particular law, obligations to the school & to the client etc. Moreover, the school is a problematic setting for practitioners to maintain confidentiality. Confidentiality, boundaries and power are supposed to be fundamental principles in social work practice [10]. Advances in child development, variations in parenting, religion and cultural factors, should stimulate consideration of how these ethical principles apply to various situations [9], [11]. Similar ethical dilemmas were present throughout the whole pilot phase of the project especially when dealing with single cases, when children and parents were facing a crisis. In particular, disclosing information obtained by students and parents with other school personnel was often a dilemma for the SSWS team, and had to be done only on a "need to know" basis.

C. Assessment of school settings' needs.

Needs assessment in school social work is a systematic way of understanding the relations between students and teachers, or between family and the school setting [12].

Valid and reliable assessment provides a base for further interventions. According to NASW, "systematic assessment, data gathering   and interpretation at multiple levels, using a variety of methods to assess characteristics and interactions of students, families and school personnel" is a fundamental part of good practice (:9) [13].

Informal meetings took part between the SSWS team, the school counselor and the school personnel.   Moreover, teaching personnel of three school settings was encouraged to fill in a 5point Likert scale questionnaire about issues that they considered important in their school. 30 questionnaires out of 50 were returned. Results were statistically analyzed via SPSS Windows and indicated that, school performance, domestic violence and parents/children relations, were the most dominant issues, according to teaching personnel views (see Fig.1).
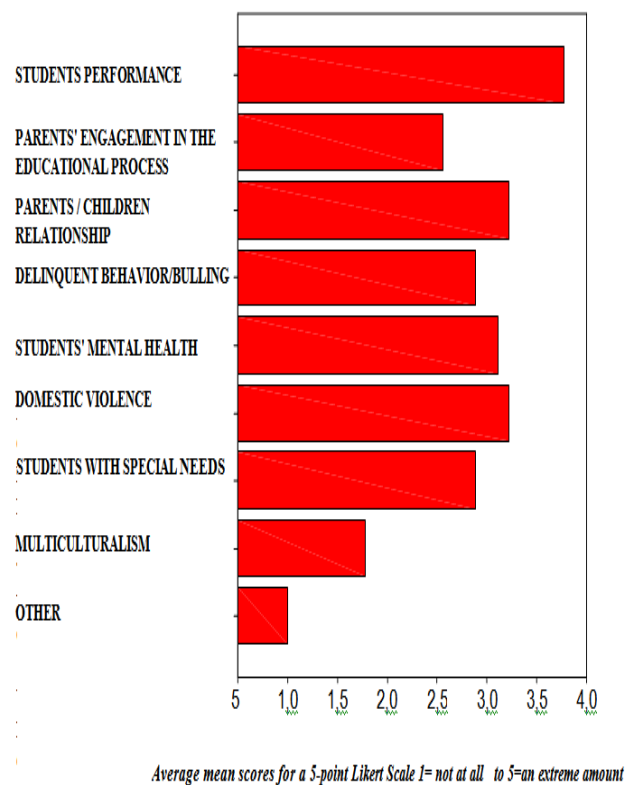

Average mean scores for a 5-point Likert Scale 1= not at all to 5=an extreme amount

Fig.1. Results of the small scale needs assessment research in three school settings (N=30).

V.STUDENT FOCUSED INTERVENTIONS

A student focused intervention model based on Sourapa-Asimakopoulou (1995), was used for single case interventions (see fig. 2).

Table 2.* *Single case intervention process*
Initial phase of investigation
↓
Defining the problem
↓
Social systems involved   ***Factors which impede individuals to take action***
Define clear aims and objectives
↓
Primary-secondary   ***Priorities-Which?***   ***Setting realistic goals-Which?***
Intervention / or Referral
↓
Types of intervention   ***Availability of community resources***
Evaluation/Feedback
*Adapted from [14]

A. Case Examples

Two case indicative examples are presented below. All names are pseudonyms in order to ensure anonymity of the participants.

1. *Miranda is a 7 yrs old girl, and goes at the 2nd class of the primary school. Her mother 45 yrs old, comes from Albania, she is not fluent with Greek. The father is Greek, 75 yrs old and with severe health problems. The mother referred to the SSWS, and complained for depression problems and also claimed that Miranda was socially excluded from the school environment and her education performance is low. The family lives on a small pension& receives food from the church. There is no support from informal social networks although the father has children from his first marriage. Miranda' mother does not feel comfortable to talk with the school teacher or leader. An intervention from the SSWS*

social worker was made to make a link between Miranda's parents and school teacher in order to facilitate communication between home and school. SSWS team had collaboration with the teacher and the school principal so that a volunteer personal tutor could give lessons to Miranda during the summer period. The Local Parents Group gave the money for Miranda to participate in all school activities, visits at museums etc. The couple received counseling sessions from the SSWS psychologist. The family received financial support from a special emergency account of the Glyfada Municipality, to renovate the house. Miranda's mother was advised to refer to a special agency for mental health problems for her depression.

2. *Eleana is 14 year old girl at the time of case referral she had a lot of drop outs from high school and she was about to lose the school year. The school principal and the school counselor referred the case to the SSWS. We contacted the family and we carried out home visits. Home visits revealed that her mother has been in a wheel chair since E. was born. The girl had a history of anorexia, and was passing through a depression period. The family was very close to Orthodox church and denied to visit a psychiatrist. School counselor made a report so that the girl had the opportunity to be home educated. The family accepted the SSWS social worker to have regular home visits. Community agencies' availability enhanced trust and after a short period the adolescent returned to school. Since then we have frequent follow-up sessions with the family.*

As already mentioned above, school social work crisis intervention aims at promoting those protective factors which will help the juvenile and the family to overcome a crisis, as well as to support school personnel to recognize the signs of vulnerability and to support the family environment. A holistic approach was implemented in both cases. In the first case, the main factors which impeded individuals to take action were a) lack of existing informal networks, b) severe physical illness and c) long term unemployment. Mirandas' mother was also experiencing the burden of caring of her husband, while at the same time she had to respond to the parenting role. She also experienced a long-term unemployment period, and the prospects of finding a job in the near future were really low. In addition, language barriers impeded her involvement in the education process for her child. It was important to set clear and realistic goals from the beginning, taking also into account the available community resources. Apart from making a good use of own resources, networking with special agencies was part of our intervention in order for Miranda's mother to see a specialist for her depression.

In the second case, the family had a member with physical disability (Eleana's mother), which was kept a secret from the school community. Eleana's mother was a wheel chair user and had never visited the school. Here it is important to mention the existing lack of urban planning friendly to the disabled, in Greece. Eleana had experienced anorexia in the past and the family had showed a strong resistance in receiving special help. Factors which impeded Eleana's parents to take action were, the disability of the mother, family's principles and values linked strongly with religion, as a result they rejected mental health support from psychiatrists. The first goal of SSWS team was to build trust,

between the team and the family. This was achieved by showing respect to the families' current values. The collaboration with the school counselor was important in order to overcome bureaucratic obstacles, and allow the student to get home education. The fact that the SSWS team showed at the beginning respect for the family's principles and values linked with religion, allowed the family system to become more willing to receive special help.

VI. A SYSTEM FOCUSED INTERVENTION

As mentioned above, system focused interventions target the whole school population, in order to promote mental health, enhance students' coping skills and resilience, and create a positive and supportive environment for all students. A bulling prevention project was included in the annual school curriculum it lasted one month and targeted all school student population. Class meetings took place in a separate room where we could all sit in a circle for two teaching hours, without a break. The process was mainly experiential (role playing, small groups tasks, etc) and some classes were co-facilitated by the class personal tutor.

Systematic evaluation of a programme is useful in order to plan future interventions. Primary prevention programme's evaluation may use both a positivist approach with questionnaires (quantitative indicators), as well as a qualitative approach (open discussions with individuals involved) [15]. At the end of the process an open questionnaire was delivered to all participants. Students were encouraged to express their views concerning what they liked most, if there were parts of the seminar that they found difficult, what new coping skills they learned that they can use in their everyday life, and if they would like to participate in a similar project again the future. Students and educators were also encouraged to propose projects and themes that they would like to work with in the future. Material derived from open questions was coded, thematically categorized and was statistically analyzed via SPSS Windows [16]. Finally, frequent multidisciplinary team meetings took place with a reflective purpose in order to redefine the collaboration of SSWS with the local school settings. Outcomes of these meetings were written down as a report for the Ministry of Education, Culture & Religious Affairs.

A. Quantitative Outcomes

Evaluation outcomes indicated that 92 out of 253 participants from 12 to 15 yrs of age liked the videos, while 85 liked group discussion and expression of personal experiences. 47 students were more interested in small group tasks and role playing (see Table II). 23 students out of 253 reported that they found it difficult to talk about themselves in front of their peers, while 19 expressed their difficulty to understand some concepts, and 11 participants found it difficult to understand the videos. The vast majority, (190 out of 253) reported that they did not find any difficulty during their participation in the seminars. 23 participants found if difficult to talk about themselves in front of their peers, while 19 students could not understand several concepts (see Table III). With regard to knowledge that they gained from the process, 39 students referred to better ways to resolve a conflict, and 26 reported that they learned ways to empathize with others. 24 participants indicated that they learned new

communication skills and did not want to be a passive "observer" any more (Table IV). Finally, the vast majority of the participants reported that they were willing to participate in a similar project again in the future.

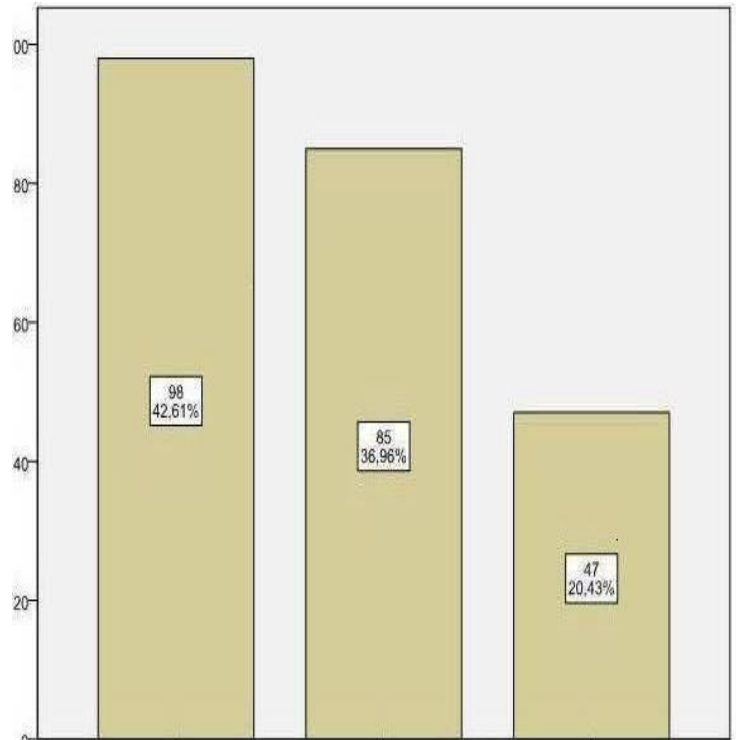Table 3. What did you like the most? (N= 253)
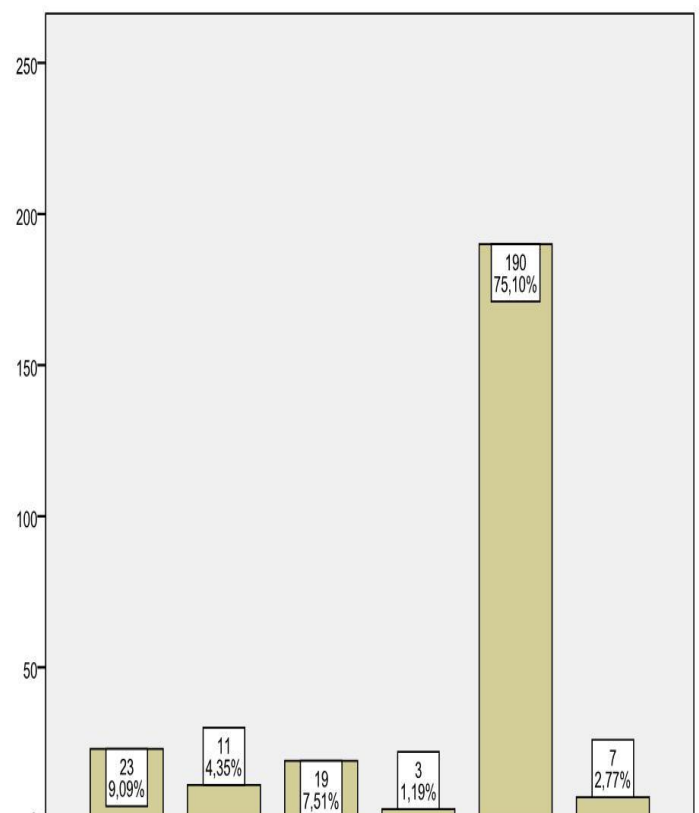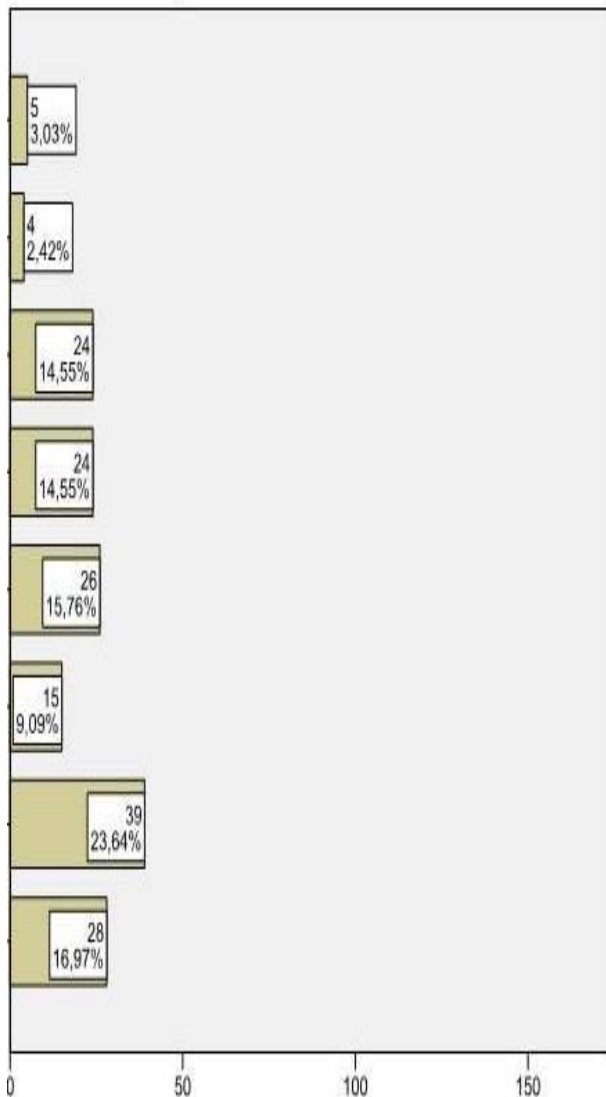

Table 4 What did you find difficult for you? (N=253)

Table 5 Have you learned something that you can apply in your life? (N=165)

B. Qualitative Outcomes

Material derived from the open questions indicated that the majority of the students felt that their participation was a positive experience: "*It was a great experience for me that I would like to repeat*", "*I felt closer to my colleagues and to the teachers*", "*I would like to learn more about similar subjects*, are some selected narratives. However, several students found it difficult to be part of an experiential group process. Indicative narratives are the following: "*I felt uncomfortable to talk about myself in front of my peers*", "*I did not find something positive to say about me*", "*It was difficult to express my feelings in the group*". When they were asked to say what they learned from this process, participants mentioned that they had the opportunity to learn communication skills, and dealing with difficult feelings: "*I learned alternative ways to deal with my anger*", I realized that I am not the only one who feels frustrated some times, others feel the same way too". Some also indicated the importance of "belonging" as follows: "*I realized that we are all part of the community, we are part of the group*",

"*being part of the group makes me feel more confident*". Participants also expressed their will for similar projects to be repeated and the most dominant subjects were "*relationships with parents and peers*", "*Safe use of internet*", "*School Bulling*", "*Stress grief & depression*" and "*Sex education*". Finally, teaching personnel reported that they would like similar activities to be repeated at least three times a year, and considered experiential learning and small group process as the most effective technique. Students' narratives consist a valuable material for analysis however; the focus of this paper is mainly to present the design process and implementation of a project, which is a new good practice in the Greek social policy field.

VII. DISCUSSION

This paper described the pilot phase of a SSWS which was implemented under the umbrella of the New Local Government Act 3852/2010 (Kallikratis Programme [1]. Annual evaluation of the programme indicated that a) SSWS contributed to the improvement of school climate, b) participants reported that they came closer to their tutors after the system focused interventions c) the built of trust among teachers and SSWS team determined the positive outcome of student focused interventions, and d) students' voice was heard.

When dealing with student focused interventions, networking with other special agencies in the community is very important [17], [18]. However, in the present project, this was not easy to happen in all cases, due to lack of available resources. Moreover, some parents and caregivers were reluctant to trust the SSWS team, because the service was operating at a local level, and it would be difficult to keep anonymity and confidentiality [11].

There is evidence in the literature showing that school social workers have been always influenced by conditions and events in the social system where they practice. As a result, economic crisis in Greece during the past 7 yrs is not irrelevant with the impact on families' lives and returned the focus of school social work towards adverse social conditions and the physical needs of students. Increased poverty and examples of child neglect began to concern the local social policy agencies & other professionals who work in the child welfare field in Greece. The main goal of the implementation of school social work service is to act at a welfare level, and avoid legal intervention. But when this is not possible existing law [19], permits legal intervention in family life. School leaders and teachers were informed that it is legally possible to refer to the Public Prosecutor's Office for Juveniles in order to prevent τhe worst consequences of existing domestic violence on the lives of students who are at-risk [19].

There is a complex debate worldwide, regarding certain ethical guidelines which have to be respected by practitioners during front line social work. A fundamental principle of all school social work practice is confidentiality. However, school social workers are often faced with having to decide what information needs to be shared and with whom this information needs to be shared [9].

Limitations of the present pilot phase of the SSWS were: a) lack of continuous political support, b) lack of community resources to support interventions and c) reluctance of parents and teachers in contacting SSWS team, especially in

cases when severe domestic violence existed.

VIII. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Contemporary school social work takes place throughout the whole school and community, it takes place through policy change, and it takes place with at-risk students and their families as well as through individual and group work with students who struggle both emotionally and academically. The pilot phase of the project indicated that it is important to ensure sustainability of the School Social Work Service (SSWS), because it responds to the current school community needs and the cost of the service is covered by own resources, so there will be no further cost for the Greek government during the economic crisis period which has resulted in a reduction of social welfare costs. SSWS must be incorporated in Local Self-Government Law, as a separated section of the Department of Local Social Services. SSWS is an innovating project in Greece, and can be a "good practice" example for other local authority social services. Information about the SSWS activities should be given at: a) Vertical Level (Ministry of Education, Mayor and Office of Education), b) Horizontal level: Multidisciplinary collaboration with all local communities' networks. Information about SSWS activities should be available, via the official local authority's site. SSWS must sustain its community character and do referrals to other more specialized agencies (Community Mental Health Centers, Family Centers etc). It is also important that all SSWS activities are evaluated in an annually basis. Finally, juveniles' voice must be heard and taken seriously into account when planning future interventions.

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